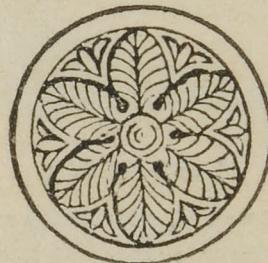


Old Ambrose.



LONDON:
JAMES BURNS, 17 PORTMAN STREET,
PORTMAN SQUARE.

1843.

LONDON:

PRINTED BY ROBSON, LEVEY, AND FRANKLYN,
Great New Street, Fetter Lane.



Old Ambrose.

Oft in life's stillest shade reclining,
In desolation unrepining ;
Without a hope on earth to find
A mirror in an answering mind —
Meek souls there are, who little dream
Their daily strife an angel's theme ;
Or that the rod they take so calm,
Shall prove in heaven a martyr's palm.

KEBLE.

“ I SHOULD like to introduce you to an old friend of mine,” said Mr. Walton to the new clergyman. “ He is a remarkable instance of the clearness of views and the consistent practice which a regular and attentive, though uneducated, church-goer will acquire. I have more respect—nay, almost reverence—for

Old Ambrose, though a poor old labouring man, than for almost any one I know."

Mr. Hammond expressed his readiness to become acquainted with one of whom his friend spoke so highly.

"What say you, Anna and Elizabeth?" said Mr. Walton, turning to his two daughters. "Suppose we dine early to-morrow, and take Mr. Hammond in the evening to see Old Ambrose?"

The young ladies gladly assented to the proposal, for the good old man was a great favourite with them as well as with their father.

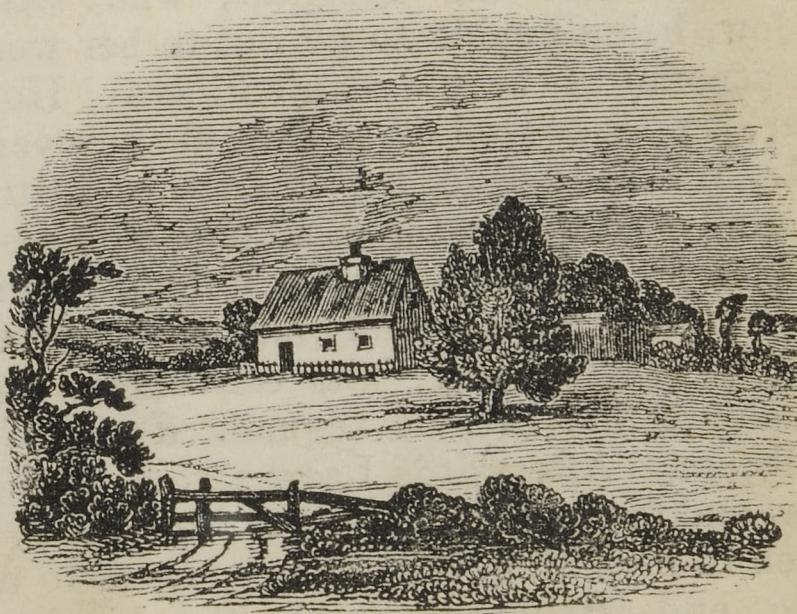
The evening was calm and pleasant, when the party set out on their walk, according to previous arrangement, to see Old Ambrose. It was one of those delicious midsummer evenings, which one almost hopes will never come to a close, like the calm old age of a Christian, when the heat and burden of mid-day life is past.

"Elizabeth must tell you all about our old friend," said Mr. Walton; "for she it was that first became acquainted with him." Elizabeth, however, requested that her father would relate the circumstances. So he continued:—

"We first knew him by sight, from observing him at church, Sunday after Sunday, always occupying the same place in the fifth row of the middle aisle."

"O, you mean the old man with white hair," said Mr. Hammond, "I have myself been much struck by his appearance, and intended to take an opportunity of making acquaintance with him."

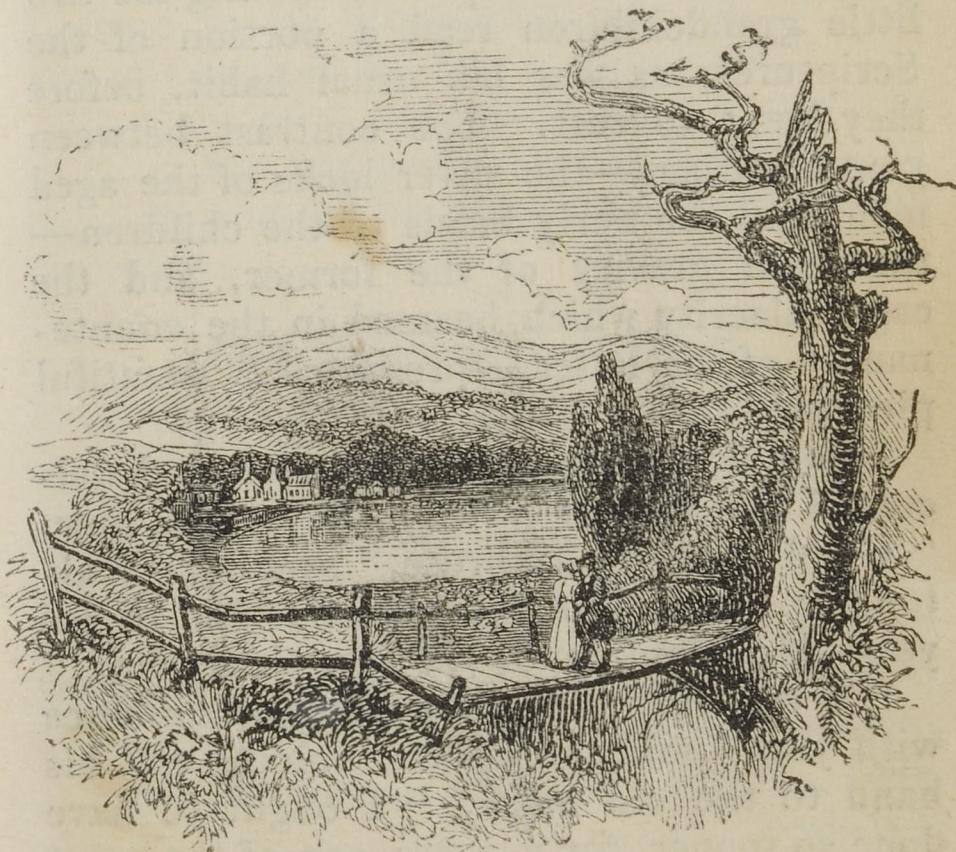
"It is the same," said Mr. Walton. "For a long time, I never missed him from his accustomed place. There he was seated, generally before we came into church; and if he happened to be rather later, which was very seldom the case, the old frequenters of the free-seats used to leave his place unoccupied, being quite sure that he would come. At last, I missed him for two Sundays; so I inquired where he lived, and went to look for him.



"It was a small and poor-looking cottage in the outskirts of the town. When I arrived at the door and knocked, no answer

was returned. I raised the latch, and entered ; still no one appeared. The hearth was cold, and the lower part of the house was apparently unoccupied. I gently opened the inner door which led to the upper part of the cottage ; and on listening, I heard a voice which was familiar to me :—it was Elizabeth reading the Scriptures to the old man, who lay apparently on his death-bed. His daughter was supporting his head, and his grandchildren kneeling by the bed-side ; it was an affecting, yet gratifying sight. I was delighted to find that Elizabeth had been before-hand with me in relieving the wants of the poor family, for they were really in great distress : the daughter, who was a widow, being unable to go out to her work, on account of the old man's illness. However, it pleased God that he should recover.” (Mr. Walton did not say that it was instrumentally owing to the kindness of himself and his daughters, in providing him with proper necessaries and medical advice.) “ This was the way,” he continued, “ in which we first became acquainted with Old Ambrose. Afterwards I saw a good deal of him, and found him, as well as his family, so much to my liking, that I moved them to my farm, and established Sarah, the daughter, as superintendent of the dairy. Old Ambrose does what he can on the farm, and that willingly ; but it is not much.”

The party had by this time walked about a mile from the town along the main road, and then turned off by a path which led through Mr. Walton's estate. It wound pleasantly along some meadows by the side of a small stream shaded with alders, until it brought them to a place where the water was dammed up, and formed a pool of five or six acres,



the banks of which had been planted with much taste. They crossed over a rustic bridge,

and came immediately to an old farm-house with gables and mullioned windows, which Mr. Walton had made his dairy. The old-fashioned garden, with its regular walks and berders edged with box, was kept up just as it had been formerly; and a venerable mulberry-tree spread its shade around. It was indeed a very pleasant spot.

They found Old Ambrose seated on a wooden bench in the porch, hearing his two little grandchildren read a portion of the Scriptures, as was his usual habit, before they went to rest. The contrast between youth and age—the silver locks of the aged man, and the curly heads of the children—the calm gravity of the former, and the eager alacrity which beamed in the countenances of the latter,—presented a beautiful picture.

The old man rose from his seat, and welcomed the visitors with a respectful bow. “Good evening, Ambrose,” said Mr. Walton; “I have brought a new friend to see you—Mr. Hammond, our new clergyman.”

“I am very glad to make acquaintance with you,” said the curate, holding out his hand to the old man. “I ought to have done so sooner, for you are one of the most regular of my congregation.”

“God bless you,” said Old Ambrose; “the clergy have been kind friends to me all

my life ; and I think it was a good day when you came amongst us, sir."

It does not take long for good Christian Churchmen, whatever may be their difference of station, to become acquainted with each other. The young curate and the old man were soon on the most friendly terms ; and Mr. Walton and the whole party were seated round the ample porch. " I have been telling Mr. Hammond," said he, " how you and I came to be acquainted, and he is very anxious to hear the rest of your history."

The old man was easily led on to relate to them the few particulars of his life ; and the following is the substance of his simple narrative :

Old Ambrose's History.

" My time has passed away in much the same manner as that of hundreds of others in my station. I have had many trials, but many more mercies, in my day. I have been a hard-working man from my youth up. Year after year, and day after day, from sunrise to sunset, I have laboured for my bread. My chief pride has been to give my master an honest day's work for his wages ; and when one day's work was done, my chief care has been to be sure of work

to-morrow. Many's the time I have not been sure how to get my daily bread ; but somehow or other, God has always provided for me.

“ I was born at the little village of A—, just on the other side of the town ; and I do not know that I ever was ten miles from it except once, when I drove farmer Yolkham's famous beast that won the prize at the cattle-show. My father and mother had four children, and I was the eldest. All the learning I ever got was at the Sunday-school. We were taught to read, but not to write. The clergyman used to take great pains to teach us the Church Catechism, and tell us the privileges of our baptism ; and that if we prayed earnestly, and strove, and trusted in God, he would give us strength through the Holy Ghost to persevere in keeping his laws to our lives' end. He used to have us before him in church after the second lesson, and ask us questions before the congregation. They have left off that custom now in all the churches ; but it was a good way of teaching poor folks ; and the children's parents used to think a good deal about it.

“ When I was about fourteen I got wildish, and used to go out with other boys bird-nesting and rat-hunting, and sometimes played truant on Sundays; which hurt my father more than any thing, for he was very anxious about his children, and took great pains to train us in good ways.

“ I remember—indeed I have good reason to remember—going one Sunday with some other boys and snaring a hare. It was the first and last I ever snared, and I was very proud of it, and thought I had done a fine thing; though I knew it was wrong, for my father had often told me so. My father heard what I had done. He was a mild but resolute man, not subject to violent passion, but firm and determined. I shall never forget the look he gave me. ‘ So you have been snaring a hare,’ said he, ‘ when I ordered you not.’ I was all of a tremble, for he took out a large clasp-knife, and opened it, looking at me very sternly. He got up and walked out at the cottage-door. I could not think what he was going to do; however, I soon found out, for he came back with a thickish ash-plant, which

he had cut out of the garden-hedge, and, taking me by the collar, gave me the soundest thrashing I ever had in my life. ‘Now go to bed,’ said he, ‘and I will talk to you more about it to-morrow.’

“ Next day, about the same time, he called me to him; and seeing that I was very penitent, he spoke to me with great kindness. ‘ Ambrose,’ said he, ‘ I am glad to see you ashamed of yourself for what you have done. It was a very sinful deed. You have broken three of God’s commandments. You broke the fourth commandment, in not keeping the Lord’s day holy, but going after your own pleasure; you broke the fifth commandment, in not honouring and obeying your father; you broke the eighth commandment, which says, ‘ Thou shalt not steal:’ the hare you killed belonged to the squire, because it was bred and fed on his land, and he is at great expense to take care of them. So that you sinned against your duty to God, and your duty towards your neighbour. Let me never hear of your doing the like again.’ I promised him that he should not.

‘ Well, we will talk no more about it; I can assure you, my son, it hurt me to beat you quite as much as it hurt you to be beaten. It is the first time I ever did so, and I hope it will be the last. Perhaps this beating will save you from being a thief and a poacher.’

“ And so it did: I never poached again. And often, when I have seen the evil courses which others have fallen into who began first by snaring a hare, and their parents encouraged them, I have thanked God for giving me a good parent, who checked me at the first.

“ My father was kinder than ever to me afterwards, and I soon forgot the beating, though the good effects of it remained. Soon after there happened what I have always looked on as the most important event in all my life. The clergyman gave out in the church, that the bishop would come to the town of — in about six weeks, and all the young people were to go to the cathedral to be confirmed. I did not very much heed it at the time, and thought only about having a holyday; but when I got home, my father said

to me, ' Ambrose, this is a very serious business: you are going to renew, in the presence of God, the promises and vows which were made for you at your baptism, and so secure a continuance of God's blessing. I wish you to know thoroughly what you are going to do. The clergyman has given notice that he intends to explain all about it to you, every Tuesday and Thursday, at half-past six o'clock in the evening; and I would have you go every day without fail, for he can teach you more about it than I can.' I was going to tell my father, that that was just the time when I had to take home farmer Yolkham's horses, but he prevented me; ' I will speak to your master, and I have no doubt he will let me look to the horses for you.'

"Farmer Yolkham readily consented, and let me off from my work a quarter of an hour earlier, in order that I might clean myself before going to the parsonage. So I went regularly twice a-week, with about twenty other boys; the girls went on Wednesdays and Fridays. Some of the boys took it very lightly, and thought all they had to do

was to say the Catechism by heart ; but God gave me the understanding to see that it was a business of great importance, and I was very anxious to learn thoroughly what it was that I was going to take upon myself. The clergyman went step by step through the Catechism with us, explaining every part of it ; shewing us that we were made God's children at baptism, and pledged by our sponsors to walk according to God's laws, and to believe in him and obey him all the days of our life. Then he shewed us what we were to believe, and what we were to do, as it is summed up in the creed and the commandments, and how we were to seek, by prayer, for God's assistance, without which we could do nothing. All this he taught us carefully ; and to those who were inattentive, he explained it over and over again. I am sure if any of us did not quite understand it, and perceive the great importance of it, it was not his fault. The day before we went, he had us all before him at the church, boys and girls as well, and a good many of the parents came. He told us, that as he had so often ques-

tioned us, and was satisfied with our answers, he should not do so again, but would take the opportunity of speaking to us about what we were to do when we went to the cathedral the next day. He then bade us open our prayer-books, and he went through the confirmation-service, shewing us where we were to answer, and how we were to behave ourselves. And then he told us, that though it was necessary that we should perform our parts of the service respectfully and reverently, yet it was on the frame and disposition of mind in which we renewed our solemn engagement with God, that the benefit of confirmation mainly depended ; and he bade us pray earnestly for God's grace to enable us to do our parts heartily and sincerely. I paid great attention to what he said, for he spoke to us as if we were his own children ; and I prayed that night and the next morning more earnestly than I had ever done before.

“ It was a day I shall never forget as long as I live, because I think that I began to make improvement from that time. The sun shone brightly and

cheerfully as we walked to the town. There was a cart with benches in it, which held about a dozen girls; and they went in it, half and half at a time, the rest walking with the schoolmistress: the boys went behind with the master. When we got to the great door of the cathedral, the clergyman met us very kindly, and led us in with him, and ranged us all in order. There were three or four hundred besides ourselves, and a beautiful sight it was. Most of the boys and girls behaved very well, though some were too much looking about them; but when the service began, we all listened very attentively. I remember I was sitting near the bishop; and when he asked us the question, 'Do ye here, in the presence of God and of this congregation, renew the solemn promise and vow which was made in your name at your baptism, ratifying and confirming the same in your own persons, and acknowledging yourselves bound to believe and do all those things which your godfathers and godmothers then undertook for you?' I answered, 'I do,' so loud that the bishop looked at me, as if he was glad

to hear me speak so heartily ; and I thought he remembered it again when he came to put his hand on my head. I felt very humbled and grateful to God when the bishop blessed me and prayed for me, saying, ‘ Defend, O Lord, this thy child with thy heavenly grace, that he may continue thine for ever, and daily increase in thy Holy Spirit more and more until he come to thy everlasting kingdom.’ I knew that the bishop stood in the place of the apostles, and had a divine commission from God to pronounce his blessing upon his servants. Afterwards, when he went to his throne to address us, you might have heard a pin drop. He explained to us over again, but in more grave and solemn language than the clergyman, the meaning of what we had been doing, and the nature of the engagements into which we had now entered for ourselves. He told us that we were now pledged, by our own promise, to keep God’s commandments, and that we must keep them not in the letter only, but in the spirit. Confirmation, he said, was often a great turning-point in life. If we sincerely

prayed to God, and resolved from thenceforth to walk in his ways, our lives would be satisfactory and full of comfort ; whether we were rich or poor, servants or masters, it mattered not, while God was with us, and we were in good hope of obtaining glory hereafter. But if we forgot our promises, we should get into bad ways, and grow continually worse and worse, and be miserable in this world, and eternally lost in the next.

“ After this, he concluded by telling us that it would be our high privilege to partake of the body and blood of Christ our Lord ; and he earnestly advised us to begin on the first opportunity, and continue it through life.

“ It is more than sixty years since that day ; but I never see the grey spires of the cathedral peering over the hill, but I think on the promises and vows which I made in the presence of God and the congregation, and fancy I hear again the bishop’s text, ‘ Continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them, and that from a child thou hast

known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation, through faith which is in Christ Jesus' (2 Tim. iii. 14, 15). That day was indeed blessed by God to my profit. I began to pray both night and morning more regularly and earnestly than I had done, and to think more about what I was doing. I went regularly with my father to church, morning and evening; and always attended the Lord's supper. Some of the young fellows about my age laughed at me, and said it was time enough when I was an old man to go twice a-day to church, and attend the sacrament. But I told them, '*I did not know that I ever should be an old man*; and that the bishop, as well as the clergyman, had advised us to begin immediately; and I saw no laughing matter in it, for the best people in the parish all did so.' Thus I used to argue at first; but after a while I found a surer argument, from the experience which I had of the benefits of the holy communion, as well as the other services of the Church. I found that it brought before me a lively remembrance of all that Christ the Lord had done and

suffered for us; so that when I was tempted to sin, all these things came into my mind, and saved me from the temptation. And the more I shaped my life according to the word of God, the happier I always was. I felt quite certain that God's word was truth; and full of hope that he would save me for the sake of his Son Jesus Christ, and make me holy through his Spirit. I came to take great delight in the prayers, and services, and preaching in the church. I knew it was all taken from the word of God; for the clergyman took his text from Scripture, and explained it by other texts, proving to us from the Scriptures that what he taught us was right. I have often thought, what should we poor people do, if there were no parish-church for us to go to, and no clergyman to teach us—what lost, miserable, ignorant creatures we should be!

“ I remember once there came a ranting preacher into the parish, and a good many people went at first to hear him, and said he was a finer preacher than the clergyman, and could preach without a book. But I asked them, ‘ Who

gave him authority to preach ? I know who gave the clergyman his authority ; he was ordained by the bishop, who had received power to ordain regularly down from the apostles ; but who this ranter was, or who gave him authority, I did not know. So how could I tell that he would teach us any good ? Besides, it is a great sin, as St. Paul teaches us, to make divisions in the Church.' So I would not go to hear the Dissenter at all ; and I am very glad I did not, for some of those who went became unsettled, and took to bad and irregular ways.

" As to worldly affairs, they have gone on much about the same with me as with other persons of my class. I have had many trials, but God's grace has supported me under them. When I was about thirty, I had as much as twenty pounds in the savings- bank, and, being a strong healthy labourer, I thought I might venture to marry. Indeed, Mary and I had as good as made up our minds five or six years before, but we thought it best to wait till we could furnish our house, and begin the world decently. And great

comfort we had together for forty years. Now and then, to be sure, we were a little pinched ; for a young family soon runs away with any savings. One of the greatest helps we labourers ever had, was when the clergyman wrote to Sir John Bigland, the lord of the manor, and got the great field next to the village, and let it out in quarters of acres to the labourers. Farmer Close, who took to the farm that Lady-day, was very angry about it, and said that we had got the best bit of pasture on the farm. However, he was reconciled afterwards, when he found what a difference it made in the poor-rates. After this, I always used to have thirty strike of potatoes or so, and two flitches of bacon, to begin the winter with. Besides, it was a nice place for the children to go and work in, and learn how to do something for themselves ; and I observed that several labourers, who before went to the beer-shop for want of something to do, took to working in their gardens instead. So it was a good thing in many ways.

“ I think I was hardest pinched one time, when Mary was put to bed with

her seventh child. We were obliged to hire a girl to take care of the children, and it was very difficult to get food enough for them all; for it was a bad potato year, and I was out of work. However, when Mary went to be churched, the clergyman saw how pale she looked, and afterwards came to inquire about us; and when he found how badly we were off, he sent us that day a quartern loaf of bread, and went and told the squire; and the squire came and saw us too, and he thought it was time we had relief from the parish. But I told him I never had gone to the parish, and did not like doing so, if I could possibly help it. Not that I was too proud, but I thought it my duty to keep off as long as I could. And the squire said I was quite right, and he would find a job for me to do. So he set me to dig a plantation, and gave me twelve shillings a-week; besides which, the lady sent a large can of soup every other day for the children. So I got through that winter very well; and I have always found, through life, that when I have been worst off, God has raised up a friend to help me.

“ But poverty is a light affliction, in comparison with some which poor and rich alike are called on to endure. Great as are the comforts and blessings of domestic love, it is also the occasion of heaviest sorrow. The parents of a numerous offspring must expect to mourn for some taken early from them, and to grieve for others who, notwithstanding their greatest care, do not come up to their fond hopes. I had a fine brave boy—all that father could wish—he was the eldest of them all, and an example to the rest of all that was good, and obedient, and loving. I sent him to the day-school in the parish, and, with some trouble, kept him there when he might have been doing something to earn his bread ; but I wished him to have the advantage of more learning than his father, as the times seemed to require it. He was the best boy at the school, and often brought home books given him by the master as rewards, or borrowed from the school-library, which he would read to his mother and me on the winter-evenings. Perhaps we set our minds too strongly on him, and were too much

lifted up by the promise which he gave. God saw that it was best to part us : best for him, because he was fit for a better place ; and best for us, lest our too great fondness might draw our hearts away from God. But we have no right to inquire too curiously into the cause of God's dispensations ; it is enough for us to bow to his will. One day, our dear boy, the pride of our hearts, who had gone forth in the morning full of health and life, was borne home a mangled, lifeless corpse, having been crushed beneath a cart-wheel. I will not dwell on the sad particulars. We laid him in his grave with many tears, and bowed in submission to the will of God.

“ But God saw fit to chaste us again through the suffering of those whom we loved best. We had a daughter, comely and modest ; she was the very picture of her mother, when I remember her in the first prime of womanhood. Her, too, we doated on with more than parents' fondness. She gladdened our cottage-hearth with her presence, and cheered us with her dutiful service. In an evil hour she re-

ceived the addresses of one of the youths of the village. To be sure there was not much to find fault with in him. He was frank and good-natured, and seemed to love her truly: but I never liked his careless jaunty look, and had heard that he was sometimes guilty of wild pranks. So I thought it became me as a father to bid Susannah look more carefully into his character before she agreed to marry him. No good, I told her, could come of joining herself with one who was not a true servant of God, and did not lead a sober honest life. However, he was aware of my thoughts, and knew that, much as Susannah loved him, she would never marry him without her father's consent. So he came regularly to church, and behaved as if he was an altered man; and told me that, if he had been guilty of irregular conduct, he was heartily sorry for it. All of us were liable to error; and he hoped that I would forgive him, as God, he knew, would. I was won over by these fair speeches: and seeing poor Susan's heart set upon it, I gave my consent at last to the marriage.

“ For some time after the wedding, all went on well enough ; and I began to hope my misgivings had been unfounded. However, many months had not passed, before his conduct began to change towards her ; and my daughter, though she never complained, was plainly suffering in her health and spirits. First, he left off going to church, which was a sure sign of evil ; then he took to the beer-shop and bad companions, and stayed out at nights, or came home drunk, and abused his poor wife. He was even so unmanly as to beat her, though she was all meekness and patience, and never returned him an angry word. What will not poor woman sometimes endure ! But God will recompense her in the resurrection of the just. Things went on from bad to worse, until one night he drove her out of the house, and she came starved and shivering to her father’s cottage. My spirit was greatly moved. I remonstrated with him, threatened to go to a magistrate, appealed to his sense of duty to God and man, and the promises he had made to me before I gave my consent that he

should have my daughter. He was humbled and ashamed ; and afterwards, when he saw that poor Susan was dangerously ill from his bad treatment, he seemed really to feel it. However, he soon went back to his evil ways, until at last he was taken up with a gang of poachers, for being concerned in a fray when one of the squire's keepers was killed, and was sentenced to be transported ; indeed, I was told he had a near escape of being hung. After he left the country, Susan never held up her head again. Partly from ill-treatment, and partly from grief, she pined away gradually, and grew weaker and weaker, until an early labour ended her sufferings, and she and her dead infant were buried in one grave. Of all the afflictions which I have endured in life, to see my poor meek daughter's sufferings was the greatest. Sadly would her mother and I talk over our bereavement : until God's mercy and the dutiful behaviour of our remaining children gradually effaced the wound from our hearts.

“ And so we lived on together many

more years, peaceably and contentedly, until it was time for us to part. It is now about seven years since my dear wife died ; but she went in such hope and peace, that, deeply as I felt her loss, I thought I had no right to repine. All my children whom God had spared were gone out into the world, except one daughter. After a while she married too ; and as I was past doing work, I was afraid I must have gone into the poor-house. But she and her husband said, ‘I should never do that, while they could maintain me : it was contrary to law as well as gospel.’ So I came to live with them here in the town, and very good they have been to me.

“ At last it pleased God to take Sarah’s husband, leaving her a widow with three small children. But God gave her health and strength, and she had pretty regular out-door work, and I got a little now and then. So we managed pretty well, till I was taken ill ; and then I do not know what would have become of us, if God had not sent Miss Elizabeth and good Mr.

Walton to help us. Since then we have been very comfortable, and want for nothing. My greatest pleasure is to go to God's house on Sundays, and on week-days after work to hear these children read the Bible. They are very good children," said the old man, patting them on the head; "and I often think that, poor as my lot has been through life, yet, with one or two exceptions, I could scarcely wish them a happier."

Mr. Hammond was both pleased and affected by the godly simplicity of the aged Christian, and shook him cordially by the hand, promising to call and see him frequently.

"Old Ambrose will remind us," said he, as they walked homewards, "of the words of the Psalmist: 'I have been young, and now am old, yet never saw I the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging their bread.'"

"This is the man," said Mr. Walton, "whom your modern philosophers would call a poor ignorant rustic. I never see old Ambrose, whether at his cottage or in his seat at church—I never mark his calm, contented eye, and the holy meekness of his demeanour,—without thinking that he will

occupy a very high place amongst the saints of heaven. He is

— ‘one to whom
Long patience hath such calm composure
given,
That patience now doth seem a thing of which
He hath no need.’

There is in his character a humble, yet independent tone of thought—a ‘poorness of spirit,’ without a particle of meanness—a calm contented serenity—a deep religious feeling, divested of all the excitement of a heated imagination—which is the privilege of one who has served God from his youth up, and is passing through a quiet life to a peaceful grave.”



LONDON :

PRINTED BY LEVEY, ROBSON, AND FRANKLYN,
Great New Street, Fetter Lane.

3478708

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